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Selected Short Stories by Rabindranath Tagore, translated by Mohammad A. Quayum [Book Review]

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Rabindranath Tagore, *Selected Short Stories*. Trans. Mohammad A. Quayum. New Delhi: Macmillan, 2011. liii+160 pp. ISBN 023-033-277-3.

Professor Mohammad Quayum is an acknowledged authority on the works of the great Indian author, Rabindranath Tagore, 1861-1941. For some years now readers everywhere have been delighted to be introduced to new works of Tagore by this industrious scholar whose energy seems indefatigable and whose love for his subject is obviously passionate. And the reason for this is simple: both Tagore and Quayum love Bengali, the national language of Bangladesh, where Prof Quayum hails from, and the birth language of his author, Tagore. Anyone who is even minimally familiar with India, Bangladesh and the Bengali language will recognise immediately the kinship and the passion which underlines this long-awaited new book. Prof Quayum first told me he was translating Tagore's stories some five years ago, when he had also started to look at Tagore's rich collection of poems written towards the end of his life. It is with pleasure, therefore, that I write this short review of Quayum's translation of nineteen of Tagore's short stories, specially selected from the different phases of the author's life and with particular reference to his over-riding theme: the exploration of humanity within humanity.

The book before us begins with a good, terse sketch of Tagore's life – a life rich and colourful for a variety of reasons, not the least because here was a giant man of letters who became the first Asian to be given the coveted Nobel Prize for Literature (1913) and who returned his knighthood in protest at the barbarity of the nation which had bestowed the honour on him! Tagore was eagerly sought by leaders, scientists, writers, artists from all over the world because he was, literally, larger than life. Standing tall he cut a fine physical figure to which both men and women felt attracted and which figure charmingly calmed and soothed high emotional nerves with simple reasoning and seductive poetry. Even when writing prose he was poetic – indeed to the point, as Prof Quayum tells us, that some of his detractors (for Tagore had numerous such) accused him of trying to write stories from poems and using poetic techniques! If such accusations sound ludicrous it is because they are; from time immemorial we have celebrated prose which contains the inviting rhythms and resonances of poetry.

Quayum's book is also timely because everywhere the world over people are this year commemorating the 150th year of his birth. From Beijing to Chile, many events have been organised to honour the memory of a man who grew so large on the international stage that people could not have enough of his presence. When in June last year I was in Budapest people in the streets came

up to me to ask if I had come from the land of Tagore... where the stress on the last syllable rendered his name Tagoreh! There are statues to Tagore everywhere and his works have been translated into tens of languages. Because he was so prolific – and in so many different genres from plays to poetry to fiction to essays – there are still many which remain to be adequately rendered into languages other than his beloved Bengali.

In a longish Introduction, Prof Quayum, ever the scrupulous academic, tells us that Tagore's stories encompass the vastness of human nature and the miscellany of vicissitudes and beliefs by which human beings both degraded themselves as well as triumphed over such degradation. While Tagore is not essentially a comic writer, he is, oftentimes, capable of eliciting a good laugh by narrating episodes or describing scenes which make us laugh, or at least smile. But for the main part, Tagore remains committed to serious moral questioning of norms, values, traditions, customs and practices; in his native country of India humanity's vast book lay open for scrutiny – and Tagore scrutinised. From the sheer poverty so harrowing to the horrific treatment of women and those labelled as untouchables by those who persisted in honouring that most menacing of Indian institutions, the caste system, to corruption and weakness as enemies of our better character, Tagore was merciless in laying bare the truths behind the truths, and this did not sit easy with many.

But his genius, so abundant in its showcasing, meant that even those who hated what he was exposing about them could not but admire Tagore's convictions. Gandhi himself gave Tagore the appellation of Gurudev, the Teacher, while, to return the honour, Tagore labelled Gandhi Mahatma (the great soul). But their relationship went well beyond such mutual admiration; they argued and discussed the politics of the day and frequently differed in what possible solutions might be brought to bear. Where these two great and influential men did not differ much was in their absolute recognition that if India continued the way it had for centuries, and especially after being colonised by Britain, the future was paved with the sincerest of intentions leading to hell. Tagore was less interested in political systems than he was in changing sensibilities, and change sensibilities he did, most significantly through his creative writings.

While we can sense why Quayum chose the stories he did for this book, it would have been very helpful to learn the reasons from him. As would have been some hints about the process of translation, always a complex issue when we are dealing with the works of masters. But Quayum, thankfully, does painstakingly draw us into the stories chosen for this book both by making keen observations about them as well as by alluding to the socio-economic contexts which saw the birth of the stories. Because there is this rich sharing carefully done by Quayum, I am desisting quoting directly either from any of the stories or from Quayum's beautifully learned and incisive critiques.

I must, however, cite the last story in the collection: “A woman’s Conversion to Islam.” Given what is going on around us today the title seems strangely current. And while the details of the story may not parallel events today, its quintessence resonates: today, too, there are women converting to Islam in search of peace, tranquillity, escape, rest. This poignant story of a young Hindu girl given refuge in a strict Islamic household which also allows for the full practise of Hinduism is movingly rendered into fine English by Prof Quayum and no reader can put the book down without realising the immense depths of this brief last story. Tagore, and his contemporary champion, advocate and translator, Prof Quayum, deserve all our accolades!

The selection of stories clearly manifests Prof Quayum’s own concerns and worries about our world going crazy with obsolete adherences and I can safely vouch that in giving us a high quality rendition of some of Tagore’s best stories written over a span covering more than fifty years, Prof Quayum has filled more than just the simple gap of translation. Prof Quayum has now invited us to enjoy, rejoice and then, hopefully, act on the morality prompting both the creator of these rare gems as well as its current-day conveyer. Both deserve our undivided attention.

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